

Subversion and Subjugation in the Public Sphere: Secularism and the Islamic Headscarf

In the mid-1980s, university students wearing the Islamic headscarf started to appear in public places in Turkey, giving a new sort of visibility to Islam in the public sphere, contrary to the secularist norms sanctioned by the state.¹ Within a decade the headscarf went from being a controversial item of religious attire to a matter of Turkish national security. In February 1997, the National Security Council identified the headscarf as one of the main indicators of what they called the “Islamic threat”—the single most important threat to the well-being and security of the country—and called for the enforcement of a ban on the headscarf in all public places, including classrooms, universities, and public offices.² How is it that such a simple item of clothing can turn into such a powerful disruptive force?

This article explores the headscarf controversy in the context of contemporary debates about gender and the public sphere. I am particularly interested in how the public sphere in Turkey has been produced in relation to norms of secularism and modernity by the forging and display of new gender identities, especially through regulations on clothing and the appearance of women. I also examine the emergence of new Islamic subjectivities through the increasing visibility of the Islamic headscarf in secular public spaces, which poses a sufficiently formidable challenge to the authority and power of secularist discourse that it has been deemed

¹ There are a wide variety of ways in which women wear head coverings in Turkey. The controversial headscarf that is of concern here is one that is part of a distinct type of Islamic dress, which typically includes a scarf tied under the chin so as to conceal the hair as well as the neck, worn with loose-fitting long dresses or overcoats. This type of attire is almost identical to what has been termed *new veiling* by Arlene MacLeod, referring to a type of Muslim dress that emerged in Egypt in the early eighties and is a specifically urban and middle-class phenomenon and not a continuation of a traditional Muslim dress style (1991, 109–12).

² National Security Council decree number 406, February 28, 1997. This decree was not made public in full, but parts of it are available (in Turkish) in Eraydın (2006).

a threat to national security. By comparing the gendered and gendering interventions of the secularizing Turkish state of the 1920s and the Islamist elite of the 1990s, I will suggest that Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere requires revision. Contrary to the notion that the public sphere is a space for political participation and the expansion of political liberties, women's experiences in the public sphere require a more complicated assessment of the nature and uses of the public sphere. Indeed, I will argue that, understood as a gendered regime of presence and visibility, the public sphere can limit political liberties and operate as a form of subjugation.

The public sphere: Liberation or subjugation?

The idea of the public sphere was developed by Habermas as the field where emancipation from domination and coercion could be realized. For Habermas, the public sphere is a nonexclusive realm of private individuals debating issues of "common concern" (1989, 36).³ Habermas assumes that the ideal public sphere, which is formed through unconstrained debate and deliberation among free individuals, will allow for the emergence of reason and that reason alone will overcome domination and bring about emancipation (1989, 35–37).

The ideal public sphere functions on three principles. First, the key constitutive element of the public sphere is rational-critical debate on issues of common interest. Ideally, rational deliberation results in decisions and policies that are assumed to serve the common good, thereby bringing about emancipation. Second, for the common good to be realized, it is crucial that the public sphere remain inclusive so that "access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas 1974, 49). The third and most controversial element of the Habermasian public sphere is that particular identities, interests, and status differences are seen as the main impediment to the attainment of rational solutions to so-called common ideals and, as such, should be bracketed out of public debates (Calhoun 1992, 13). For Habermas, the common good can be attained only if the debated issues are of interest to society in general. In this account, the particularistic demands and interests of the debating individuals, as well as the issues that seem to be of concern only to a limited group of people, are construed as factors that distort and obscure rational deliberation and therefore must be avoided.

Habermas's conceptualization assumes that the public sphere is a field

³ For a more detailed discussion of the public sphere, see Çınar (2005).

wherein emancipation and democratic liberties are realized, but it overlooks the ways in which the public sphere can also produce power relations and hierarchies to the detriment of most participants. Critics have pointed out that the Habermasian notion of the public sphere treats particular identities and differences in problematic ways. Several authors have noted that the exclusion of the interests of women (Fraser 1993; Cohen 1995; Benhabib 1996), the working class, and identities forged around race, ethnicity, or religion (Calhoun 1992, 34–36) is not only discriminatory but impedes the attainment of the common good. Despite such cogent critiques, most of these scholars remain loyal to the Habermasian ideal, noting that, suitably amended, the public sphere can fulfill its promise as a field of emancipation and liberation.

Other writers have developed more radical criticisms, challenging the normative value ascribed to the ideal public sphere and questioning the emancipatory power of public discourse itself (see, e.g., Warner 1992; Berlant 1993; Landes 1995). Rather than engaging the conventional debate about how the ideal public sphere should function, these critics are concerned with the actual operations of existing public spheres. On the basis of a critical examination of existing public spheres, they suggest that particular interests and identities do not exist prior to or outside the public sphere but rather are produced by and are constitutive of the public sphere. Joan Landes, for example, argues that the exclusion of women from the public sphere in eighteenth-century France was not just a historical coincidence but a constitutive act that produced the citizen as an exclusively male subject (1995, 99). Appeals to universal principles of liberty and equality and the celebration of common interests at the expense of particularities actually consolidated white male power while concealing the subjugation of excluded subjectivities (e.g., women and black colonial subjects). This line of criticism suggests that power and domination are inherent in the founding logic of the public sphere.

Contesting the operations of publicity: The gaze as a productive technology

For Habermas and others who take speech and deliberation as its constitutive elements, the public sphere is formed when people engage in dialogue on political issues, wresting the determinants of publicity away from the sovereign and generating “public opinion [that] can by definition only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed” (Habermas 1974, 50). Within this understanding, the public emerges as actual people who produce public discourse through rational debate and dia-

logue in newspapers, pamphlets, broadsheets, coffeehouse conversations, or any other gathering where issues of common concern are addressed. Some scholars have questioned the conceptual assumptions of this account, however, envisioning the public less as an actual group of people and more as an imagined subject constituted through the conjuring of a disembodied, impersonal, authoritative voice that emerges primarily in the print media (Warner 1992, 381–82). Examining the American public sphere, Lauren Berlant observes that a white male public subject emerges with an unmarked identity, which successfully erases the marks of his maleness and whiteness, through the extension of what seem to be protections and privileges to participants of the public sphere. For Berlant, “the effect of these privileges,” particularly extended to women and African Americans, function to mark bodies with race and gender, which in turn enables the public subject “to appear to be disembodied or abstract while retaining cultural authority” (1993, 176).

Understanding the public sphere not only as a disembodied voice but also as a regime of visibility produced through the media and state-mediated discourses is particularly helpful for an examination of the production of the public subject and the appropriation of gender in the Turkish public sphere. The current-day popular press in Turkey continually invokes the voice of a disembodied public subject in news stories ranging from issues of high politics to seemingly trivial things like sports. For example, a highly popular slogan chanted at soccer games that also appears frequently in the media, not only in relation to sports but for other issues as well, is “Europe, Europe, hear our voice; this is the sound of us marching.” This slogan is telling in that it interpellates the Turkish public subject as an unmarked, disembodied, singular “us” and a competent rival to the European one. A more telling example is enmeshed in the coverage of a woman who shouted “Long live secularism!” in the midst of an Islamist rally in support of the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party.⁴ One of the major newspapers featured this story on the front page with the headline “This Is Our ‘Braveheart’” (*Sabah* 1997), conjuring a public subject who is at once secularist and national. Courageous enough to stand up to a crowd

⁴ In the late 1980s the Refah Party was the main Islamist political party in Turkey. Banned twice by the Constitutional Court, in 1998 and again in 2001, the party reappeared first as the Fazilet (Virtue) Party in 1998 and then as the Saadet (Felicity) Party in 2001. In 2001, the moderate wing of Refah/Fazilet, representing the younger generation, left the party to found the Adalet ve Kalkınma (AK, or Justice and Development) Party under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who came to power as the leader of a majority government following the November 2002 elections. Adalet ve Kalkınma was the first single party to come to power in Turkey that endorsed an Islam-based political ideology.

of Islamists on her own, this “Braveheart” woman is construed as a national hero. Although the story of the incident stems from actual events, the public subject produced here is more an imagined disembodied national subject than an actual person. Evoked through referrals to various concrete others, this unmarked Turkish public subject is nonetheless situated in an abstract space and imagined as a single body with a single voice and gaze that gains presence by marking its various others but itself remaining unmarked, disembodied, and invisible. Through positing and reproducing its others (European, Islamist) in daily discourse, the public gaze marks its periphery as it situates the public subject at the invisible center without having to explicitly name and mark itself. This publicity produces a subject position imagined as public collectivity with a particular yet unmarked identity.

If the authoritative presence of the public subject is established through various interventions in daily public discourse that mark and unmark subjects, involving a wide array of images, displays, performances, and other visual articulations, then it is clear that the public subject is constructed not only verbally, through the authoritative voice of the media, but more importantly visually, through a disembodied gaze. The media produces the public subject not only through voice but also through a regime of visibility. The print media, augmented by other media replete with cameras, audiovisual technology, videos, and satellites, “invests the public subject with the privilege and authority of gazing at most anything and everything it wants” (Çınar 2005, 39–40).

In this view, the public sphere of the late twentieth century is better understood as a field of appearances, performances, images, and displays. In contrast to Habermas’s rejection of the turn to visibility with its concomitant erosion of deliberative exchanges as an indication of the degeneration and disintegration of the public sphere (1989, 159–80), I would argue that viewing the public sphere as a visually constituted field opens up important possibilities for analyzing the circulation of power and the construction of public subjects (see also Carpignano 1999).

This understanding illuminates how the public sphere is imbricated within everyday relations of power while also contributing to the production of hierarchies of difference, exclusions, and inclusions, not only through verbal debates and dialogues but visually through images, displays, and performances. Within such a visually constituted public sphere, visibility and the controlled inclusion of particular subjectivities are technologies of authority and power. When viewed in this light, the public sphere is no longer a site of emancipation or liberation that comes through debate and dialogue but a field of visibility that subjugates through con-

trolled silences, performative acts, speech acts, and visual displays. It is a visually constituted field of power relations where subjugation operates through the ongoing marking and categorization of diverse visibilities and subjectivities by the public gaze. Consider, for example, Burçak Keskin-Kozat's analysis of the public controversy over the case of Konca Kuriş, an outspoken veiled feminist who was murdered by extremists in 2000. Keskin-Kozat draws attention to the widespread confusion and ambiguity in the media over whether Kuriş was to be categorized as "an *Islamist*, an *Islamic* feminist or a feminist" (2003, 198). Keskin-Kozat sees this ambiguity not as a symptom of the inadequacy of these analytical categories but as an instance of the ways that "social categories homogenize individuals' diverse experiences into stereotypical constructs that structure and give meaning to their everyday practices" (2003, 199). But these social categories, which are ascribed agency and culpability by Keskin-Kozat, are themselves the product of the public sphere that organizes, categorizes, monitors, and hierarchically orders public subjects through its gaze. Expanding the operations of publicity to include visual as well as verbal registers offers important clues to understanding the production of new veiling practices as a threat to national security.

Marking Islam, unmarking secularism, and possibilities for subversion

As Talal Asad (2003) has noted, secularism is not really about the suppression or exclusion of religion from political life but about its control—or, more precisely, about a particular production of religion that justifies the existence of secularism. Contrary to the assumption that secularism replaces religion, it produces and reproduces religion in order to sustain itself as the norm. "The space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive clarity of that space," Asad writes (2003, 201). To fully understand the secular appropriations of Islam by the law in Turkey, secularism must be "pursued through its shadows," the spaces to which it consigns Islam (2003, 16).⁵

In Turkey, secularism was established as one of the most essential principles of the founding ideology. The institutionalization of secularism involved the construction of a public sphere around secularist norms, which

⁵ Throughout this article I use the terms *secularism* and *Islamism* as political ideologies, or political projects, that seek to transform society and establish a sociopolitical order on the basis of a set of constitutive norms and principles.

were measured by the degree to which Islam was kept under the control of secularist discourse. Secularism established and preserved its privileged position at the center of public discourse by confining Islam to a specific and tightly monitored visibility in the public sphere. Islam was marked as the backward, the uncultured and uneducated, the rural, the traditional, the particular, the lower class, so as to allow secularism to enjoy the unmarked position of being the advanced, the cultured and educated, the urban, the modern, the universal, the upper class. The authority and privilege of secularism was predicated upon the preservation of these binary oppositions that kept Islam as the marked, underprivileged other.

West-oriented modernization and the rise of Islamism

Since the end of the eighteenth century, when the Ottoman rulers faced the necessity of reforming the administrative and political system, there has been a search for a modernization project that would successfully transform Ottoman state and society. Throughout the nineteenth century this search was marked by heated debates over what path modernization would follow: one that takes a Western/European model as the universal norm toward which society would be transformed or one that adheres to local traditions, values, and customs, namely Islam, as the basis upon which reform and change would be implemented. This search eventually culminated in the fall of the Ottoman system and the rise of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and was based on a West-oriented modernization project and a new national identity that was envisioned as Western, modern, secular, and nationalist.

This new national identity was constructed and set as the norm around which the public sphere was organized, by contrasting it with Islamism and Ottomanism, both of which were framed and projected by the founding elite as tropes of the backward, barbaric, uncivilized, dark, and catastrophic (Çınar 2001, 369–70). The ideal path for modernization for the new Turkish state was projected as distant from Islam and Ottomanism but also as retaining a sense of uniqueness and authenticity measured by distance from excessive Westernization (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 133–34). As such, Turkish modernization has always been marked by a negotiation of Islam on the one hand and Westernism on the other. This negotiation not only yielded the emergence of a new nation-state, articulated in the new legal frame and secular institutions, but also continued to generate alternatives that repeatedly challenged the official project of modernity throughout the twentieth century. For example, the Islamist movement emerged around the Refah Party in the late 1980s and started to produce a counterdiscourse to official modernity. Contesting official modernity

that had defined itself as West oriented, the Islamist discourse identified itself as an East-oriented project (Çınar 2005).

Unveiling the body and the making of the new nation-state

In the initial years of the secular Republic, its founders were preoccupied with the forging of a new image for the new nation-state, which was facilitated by the construction and display of new gender identities (see, e.g., Göle 1996; Kandiyoti 1997; Yeğenoğlu 1998). Since the new state was being built on the principles of modernization, Westernization, and secularism, this new national identity had to bear the mark of modernity, which meant not only the appearance of Westernism but also a break from the Ottoman past, a revolutionary diversion from Ottoman ways, against which the national subject could be constituted. The Hat Law of 1925 is only one of the instances through which the state undertook revolutionary changes to institute marks of modernity, nationalism, and Westernism in the public sphere. In the justification for the Hat Law, it was noted that “the issue of headgear, which is completely unimportant in and of itself, is of special value for Turkey who wants to become a member of the family of modern nations. We propose to abolish the hat worn currently, which has become a mark of difference between Turkey and other modern nations, and replace it with the hat that is the common headgear of all modern, civilized nations” (quoted in Aktaş [1991, 143]).⁶

It is clear from this statement that the founding state was directly and explicitly intervening on the bodies of its citizens by regulating and dictating the norms of the public attire and dress to erase marks of difference (i.e., Islam) and to institute marks of civilization in the quest toward the constitution of a new state around a new, national, “modern, civilized” identity. When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced the Hat Law, himself dressed in international clothes with a top hat, he said, “Gentlemen, the Turkish people who founded the Turkish Republic are civilized; they are civilized in history and in reality. But I tell you as your own brother, as your friend, as your father, that the people of the Turkish Republic, who claim to be civilized, must show and prove that they are civilized, by their ideas and their mentality, by their family life and their way of living. . . . My friends, international dress is worthy and appropriate for our nation, and we will wear it” (quoted in Yeğenoğlu [1998, 133]; translation as it appears there).

Even though the Hat Law did not formally target women’s attire, the state was directly involved in promoting its new image through the vis-

⁶ All Turkish-to-English translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

ibility of women in the public sphere. The Islamic attire of women that included the traditional veil was not banned, but local governments were asked to oversee the issue, and in some cities the veil was banned in public spaces through local regulations (Aktaş 1991, 170–73).

Under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk, the state was actively engaged in promoting the new modern, Westernized, secular image of the nation through images of women in the public sphere. Kemal Atatürk pioneered the promotion of this new image in his personal life, not only by changing his own clothing to demonstrate the new norms of male public visibility as laid down by the Hat Law but also by having banquets and dance receptions organized and sponsored by the state, to which he would take his wife and daughters dressed in elegant Western gowns. Because it had been quite uncommon for a husband and wife to appear together in public places only a decade before, let alone dance and dine together, Mustafa Kemal's bold efforts were seen as revolutionary attempts to create the "new woman" as a "symbol of the break with the past" (Kandiyoti 1991, 41). Those in secularist elite circles around Mustafa Kemal saw themselves as soldiers of a civilizing mission who were going to lead Turkish society toward a new modern, Westernized, secular lifestyle. They did this by appearing in public places as husband and wife, dressing in European-style clothing, gathering in coffeehouses and restaurants that served European dishes, and engaging in activities such as horseback riding or playing golf in prestigious clubs (Göle 1996, 61). The state was promoting the presence of women in public places and in occupations that were readily associated with men, encouraging women to become lawyers, pilots, parliamentarians, athletes, and scholars. Images of women engaged in modern activities and occupations while dressed in modern clothes proliferated in the public sphere. The state produced and distributed, not only in Turkey but also in Europe, photographs of women in military training, in athletic competitions, in courtrooms as lawyers, in the parliament as politicians, and as pilots, engineers, and teachers (Graham-Brown 1988, 218–21).

Marking bodies and political agency

These examples illustrate the ways in which the new state used women's public visibility as a strategic means through which Turkey's new secular identity could be displayed. This was done mainly because the state targeted Europe as the ultimate referee that needed to be convinced of Turkey's new modern, Westernized identity. The founders were quite aware that European perceptions of the Turks were sharply conditioned

by an orientalist view that saw the Islamic lifestyle as one that confines women behind harem walls and by images of veiled women as a symbol of oppression and barbarism (Alloula 1986). According to Leila Ahmed, the projection of Islam as barbaric, oppressive of women, and backward, which was a product of nineteenth-century colonial enterprises, served to justify colonizing interventions in the Middle East as acts of liberation of women, producing a form of what Ahmed refers to as “colonial feminism” (1992, 152). Ahmed also shows how this colonial narrative of Islam and veiling came to be uncritically adopted by the local intelligentsia to such an extent that it formed the basis of newly emerging nationalist identities in the region. In Turkey, this view of Islam was not only internalized by the intelligentsia but also became official state policy. As a result, images of women “emancipated” from the confines of the veil and the harem, with a solid presence in the public sphere, engaged in modern activity, and wearing Western clothing, enabled the new Turkish state to distance itself from the “barbaric” ways of the Ottomans and Islam and to align itself with Europe.

During the early years of the Republic, the state not only promoted images of modern, Westernized women in the public sphere but also developed legislative measures involving women’s direct participation in public and political life. A new civil code was adopted in 1926 that mandated equal rights in inheritance and marital affairs, and women were granted full suffrage in 1934. Various autonomous women’s organizations and groups were consolidated by the state in 1924 under the Turkish Women’s Federation to encourage women to take active roles in the public sphere and political life (Graham-Brown 1988, 220).⁷

The goal of the state in undertaking such measures was outlined by Kemal Atatürk when he was commenting on the granting of full suffrage to women: “This decision has earned Turkish women a higher status than that of the women of other nations. In the future, it will be necessary to search for covered, veiled and caged women [only] in history books. . . . By participating in general elections, Turkish women are now using the most important of all rights. This right, which is denied to women in many civilized countries, is now fully available to Turkish women” (quoted in Eldeniz [1956, 741]).

As suggested in this statement, the state was primarily concerned with promoting a new image for Turkey by demonstrating how it was liberating its women and ensuring a modern, civilized life for its citizens. These

⁷ For detailed information on this period see Kandiyoti (1991) and Arat (1997).

ideas resonated strongly among the members of the Turkish Women's Federation, who had assumed the civilizing mission so much so that the group's leader, Latife Bekir, said, "in Turkey, women have been called by Kemal Atatürk to rid themselves of the veil and take their places alongside men" (quoted in Aktaş [1991, 172]).

This line of thinking, which reflected the core constitutional tenet of the founding ideology of the new Turkish state, maintained that women's place and role in society are the most significant indicators that Turkey is a modern and civilized country, a goal that can be achieved if and only if Turkey distances itself from Islam. The image of the modern, Westernized, liberated woman in the public sphere, which was attained by the erasure of the mark of Islam—the veil—from the body, was a matter of the realization of the foundational cause of the new Turkish state toward acquiring a modern and civilized identity. Indeed, Kemal Atatürk himself saw the practice of veiling as a malady, a "barbarous posture" or an "object of ridicule" that needed to be corrected (Atatürk 1984, 19).

This generous extension of women's rights by the state, sometimes referred to as "state feminism," functioned similarly to what Ahmed refers to as "colonial feminism" (1992, 152) in that, as feminist critics have stressed, it was a rhetorical strategy mobilized to promote official ideology and project a new image for Turkey as a West-oriented, modern, and civilized country (Arat 1997). Such "state feminism" (White 2003), which was celebrated by Kemalists for contributing to the well-being and emancipation of women, was criticized by feminists who suggested that the granting of women's rights by the state was done only to promote official ideology and that the state was not at all interested in the actual experiences and well-being of women (Tekeli 1982; Arat 1997). Indeed, the Turkish Women's Federation that was formed in 1924 and had devoutly campaigned in support of the state's secularist reforms was disbanded in 1935—only a year after full suffrage was granted to women—because the federation went against state policy when it signed an international petition for peace and disarmament (Kandiyoti 1991, 41–42). Feminists argue that while the state was seemingly granting women's rights it seriously undermined the development of an autonomous women's movement by bringing all women's organizations under state control through the Women's Federation. When the federation dissolved, Turkey was left without any association for women. Indeed, autonomous women's movements did not reemerge until the 1990s, and the percentage of women serving in elective office did not reach the level achieved in 1937 (i.e., eighteen women parliamentarians, constituting 4.6 percent of the Great

National Assembly) for the next seventy years. In fact, it predominantly remained below 2 percent, and only in the 2007 general elections did it finally reach 9 percent.

The state's promotion of women in the public sphere has been interpreted as a call for women "to be active agents in the building of a modern nation" (Göle 1997, 67). This view is in accordance with a Habermasian notion that sees participation in the public sphere as a means of acquiring political agency. However, as feminist criticism suggests, the public visibility granted to women by the Turkish state has actually served to deny agency to women and to deny their organizations an autonomous presence in the public sphere. In fact, women's enhanced presence in the public sphere has allowed the state to constitute itself as the secular political agent capable of producing a public sphere in accordance with its own foundational norms and principles. Through a series of regulated interventions that orchestrated women's visibility in the public sphere, the secular state constructed itself as the political agent that unveiled the female body, dressing it in accordance with secular ideals and principles so as to display Turkey's new national identity for a Western global gaze.

Headscarf: Marking the boundaries of the public and the private

It is in such a discursive context that university students wearing Islamic headscarves appeared in the Turkish public sphere in the 1980s, a sphere that had been kept closely under the surveillance of secularism. By acquiring an undeniable visibility on the university campus—the epitome of the modern, the urban, the rational, and the progressive—this potent symbol of Islam disrupted the binaries that maintained secularism as the unmarked, privileged center. In the public world created by secularism, Islam could not possibly have an existence in a university setting. This is why secularist circles reacted to the headscarf with outrage, calling for stricter measures for its suppression, which eventually culminated in a ban against the headscarf in all schools and public offices that remains in effect to this day.

The secularist antagonism eventually culminated in the National Security Council decree in February 1997 that called for tighter measures against "the rising threat of reactionism (*irtica*)" (Eraydın 2006), including the ban on the headscarf. Reflecting the views of the military, which was the key force behind this decree, a high-ranking military officer who was asked, "Is it really the end of the world if civil servants begin wearing headscarves?" answered, "Yes. It is the end of the world" (Kinzer 1997). Ten years later—even after the successor of the Islamist Refah

Party, the Adalet ve Kalkınma (AK, or Justice and Development) Party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to power and, for the first time in the nation's history, Turkey's first lady is wearing the Islamic headscarf—this perception of the headscarf as a threat continues, and it is still not allowed in schools, university campuses, or public offices. Many religiously oriented university students across campuses in Turkey compromise by coming to school with either wigs or hats to cover their heads.

The disruptive power of the headscarf lies in its ability to redraw the boundaries of the private on the body, thereby redefining the constitutive limits of the public. If the public sphere is understood as those spaces and places that are open to the public gaze, then closing off certain spaces and places—and body parts—as private redraws the boundaries of the public. By delineating that which is private, the headscarf delimits the public gaze, the very mechanism through which the public is constituted. Because the norms and boundaries that constitute the public are not only formed but also challenged and subverted by shifting, manipulating, or displacing the boundaries of the private, the headscarf becomes a potent threat. It is exactly through the manipulation of the boundaries of the private as they are marked upon the body—particularly the female body—that the headscarf becomes a subversive force when it emerges in the secular public sphere, asserting its own unconventional and nonsecular (Islamic) norms of privacy. Secularist norms that draw the public-private boundaries upon the female body maintain that the hair and the neck are open to the public gaze, whereas Islamic norms (as they are interpreted by Islamists in Turkey) consider these aspects of female embodiment strictly private. When women wearing the Islamic headscarf appear in public spaces, especially in places like university campuses or public offices, which are the strongholds of secularism, this seemingly trivial piece of clothing imposes an Islamic frame on the public-private distinction and unsettles the established secular norms that constitute publicness. Thus the subversive effect of the Islamic headscarf lies in its power to redraw the boundaries of public and private spheres, thereby unsettling the authority of secularism over the body and the public sphere.

Drawing or shifting the public-private boundaries on the body through clothing not only functions to set the norms around which the public sphere is organized but also vests those who draw such boundaries on the body with political agency. It is for this reason that the Turkish state and other political actors have been interested in what people wear, where they wear it, and how they wear it. Through regulating and monitoring how people appear in the public realm, the state acquires political agency and dictates its own norms and standards of nationhood. The Turkish

nation was defined in terms of secularism, modernism, and Westernism by unveiling the female body. Hence images of women in bathing suits became one of the key symbols of the authority of secularism over the body, circulating abundantly in photographs, cartoons, and illustrations during the Republic's formative years, which were vigorously promoted by the state as proof of Turkey's devotion to modernity (Çınar 2005, 63–64). But, just as secularism was institutionalized by the new Turkish state through the unveiling of the female body, Islamism was instituted by the Islamist elite of the Refah Party by revealing the female body, similarly using the clothing of the body as a site from which to project their version of nationalism.

Islamist challenges and the headscarf: From public visibility to national security

The unveiling of the female body by the secular state was an intervention not only on bodies but also on Islam, which brought about a rupture in Islam's authority over the female body, which was maintained as a sacred site protected by the veil. The institutionalization of secularism resulted in a further rupture in Islam. On the one hand, orthodox Islam was brought under the direct control of the secular state through the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which supervised theology schools, advised the public on Islamic knowledge and practice, and appointed the imams of all mosques in Turkey. On the other hand, heterodox Islam, which is basically the Islam of mystical Sufi orders and similar informal Islamic groupings, lost its social standing after all such religious Sufi lodges and orders (*tekke* and *zaviye*, respectively) were closed down in 1925.⁸ Nevertheless, autonomous Islamic practices survived as informal mystical orders often mobilized through personal networks around musical societies or poetry and literature groups. Such heterodox Islamic practices had long existed because their traditions of secrecy and discreetness allowed them to maintain a low profile and to avoid the public gaze and the interventions of the secularist state.

Between the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the mid-1980s, secularist authority gained hegemonic status in the public sphere, coming to be perceived as the natural commonsense standard around which politics and public life were organized. This status allowed secularism to enjoy the privilege of being an invisible (unmarked), nonnegotiable, and

⁸ Şerif Mardin differentiates between orthodox and heterodox Islam going back to the Ottoman Empire and constituting the fabric of social and political life (1971).

uncontestable norm. The Islamic headscarf, worn by university students in public places, was one of the important elements that gave a new sort of visibility to Islam in the public sphere, unsettling that norm.

The Refah Party, the main Islamic political party in Turkey, started to grow in the late 1980s from a small, insignificant, right-wing party (with less than 10 percent of the national vote) into a mass party that assumed a more explicit Islamist identity. The Refah Party's first electoral success came with the local elections in 1994, when it won the mayoralties in several cities, including Istanbul and the capital, Ankara. This success was followed by a victory in the general elections in December 1995. With Refah receiving the highest percentage of votes, party leader Necmettin Erbakan became the prime minister of a coalition government in 1996.

Given the strong hold of secularism over the public sphere, secularist circles were extremely troubled by these developments. Not only the military, which saw itself as the chief guardian of secularist ideals, but, more significantly, various civil society organizations and grassroots movements perceived the rise of political Islam in Turkey as the single most important threat to the well-being and security of the country.⁹ Growing pressure from the military and these secularist associations and groups culminated in the National Security Council's decree in February 1997. As a consequence, the coalition government fell, and Erbakan's short but significant incumbency ended.

Throughout the 1990s, political and public life in Turkey revolved around the Islam-secularism divide, and the Islamic headscarf remained a top issue of antagonism between secularist and Islamist circles. Within a decade, the headscarf went from being a controversial item of religious attire to a matter of national security when it was identified as one of the main indicators of the Islamic threat in the February 1997 admonition, which called for the enforcement of the ban on the headscarf in all public places including classrooms, universities, and public offices. The increasing use of the Islamic headscarf was also one of the main reasons the Refah Party was closed down by the Constitutional Court in January 1998 (*Sabah* 1998).

The ban on the headscarf had first been introduced when the Higher Education Council passed a decree in December 1986, stating that it was mandatory for students to wear "modern clothing" at all times on school premises but leaving it up to university administrations to decide what would constitute modern clothing. This decree paved the way for the ban

⁹ The popularization of secularism, which is referred to as the "privatization of state ideology" is discussed in detail by Esra Özyürek (2006).

on the headscarf, and in most universities across the country students were denied entry to university premises unless they took off their headscarves. This ban resulted in massive demonstrations, protests, and petition campaigns not only by the students but by the supporters of the Refah Party and by people in other Islamic circles as well. These protests were perceived by secularist circles as a “rebellion against Atatürk’s reforms and the principles of the republican state Kemal Atatürk established” (*Cumhuriyet* 1987). The resolute protests of the students with headscarves and the adamant secularist backlash culminated in the Constitutional Court decision in 1991 that introduced an unwavering ban on the headscarf. But the antagonism continued until the National Security Council decree in February 1997 mandated full enforcement of the headscarf ban, a mandate endorsed by secularist civil society associations, all public offices, and the government.

The February 1997 resolution was a crucial turning point in the politics of Islam in Turkey, resulting in the dissolution of the Refah Party by the Constitutional Court in 1998 and the barring of both Erbakan and Istanbul’s mayor, Erdoğan, from active politics until 2003. While the party was immediately reorganized under the Fazilet (Virtue) Party, this intervention resulted in a split within the party ranks between the older-generation conservatives who chose to continue an antagonistic stance against secularism and the younger-generation liberals who were in favor of compromise with secularists and organized around Erdoğan. The latter group later formed the AK Party, which won the general parliamentary elections in 2002. The overwhelming electoral victory of the AK Party brought Erdoğan to power as Turkey’s first prime minister to lead an Islam-based political party that controlled a majority of parliamentary seats. Moreover, Erdoğan’s wife became Turkey’s first first lady to wear an Islamic headscarf.

Interestingly, the ban on the Islamic headscarf continues even under AK Party rule. The fact that the first lady herself wears a headscarf only carried the controversy to the level of formal state receptions and gatherings, which the prime minister and several other AK Party officials whose wives wear headscarves attend without their wives so as not to violate regulations that ban the headscarf in public offices.

The emergence of the Islamic headscarf in public spaces and the resulting battle over the secularist norms of public life did not put an end to the reign of secularist ideology or even weaken it. If anything, this process has strengthened secularism, transforming it from an ideological principle enforced by the state to a widely endorsed norm of public and private life celebrated by civil society associations and grassroots movements. Autonomous Islamist identities that have become visible in the

public sphere through the headscarf, however, certainly have had a powerful impact—revealing the authoritative and privileged status of secularism and rendering it visible and contestable, thereby making it subject to negotiation. Indeed, the headscarf dispute was the ultimate spark that triggered ongoing negotiations over the principle of secularism, which persisted twenty years after the first ban on the headscarf was introduced in 1987.

Women and the public sphere

While the headscarf has a subversive effect on the power and authority of secularism, it has a rather unexpected subjugating effect on its wearers. Just as the public visibility of modern women in the early years of the Republic served to constitute the state as a political agent and to deny agency to the women themselves, the headscarf has had the same effect, constituting the political agency of certain Islamic male elites at the cost of the agency of those women who are the most visible bearers of Islamic identity. The headscarf has served to give Islam a presence in the public sphere, but at the same time it confines headscarf-wearing women to that specific symbolic presence. While the bearers of the mark of Islamic identities—veiled women—opened up public spaces to Islam, it was predominantly men who gained political agency through this new publicity. In this respect, the Islamist male elite hijacked the power of the headscarf from the women who wore it by declaring it the symbol of the struggle of Islam against secularism. Consider, for example, the experiences of a veiled lawyer, Gönül Arslan, who notes that she has encountered discriminatory behavior not only from secularists who express disdain because of her clothing but also from Islamists who unfairly privilege her only because of her headscarf. Arslan notes that “Islamic identity should not be identified with a person’s place and status in society. . . . Islamic identity becomes a social identity, which should not happen.” As she points out, “Muslim men do not have to face this kind of discrimination because they don’t bear any marks of difference,” nor are their political options constrained by the privilege of relegation to Islamic symbol (quoted in Tezcan [1996, 6]). The headscarf gives a certain degree of freedom to Islamist men, since they are able to enjoy the privileges of the public visibility of Islam without having to suffer the consequences of bearing its mark.

The headscarf—or the image of the veiled woman as a representation of Islam—proliferated in Islamist discourses during the 1990s. The leaders of the Refah Party actively promoted images of veiled women in their election campaigns. During public meetings and rallies, veiled women

were gathered in the front and were made the focus of media attention. Islamist writers rallied behind the headscarf, which, according to one columnist, is “akin to the national flag” (Kaplan 1996, 2), and the Islamists who launched the Fazilet Party after the Refah Party disbanded in 1998 considered making the headscarf the official party symbol (*Milliyet* 1998).

But the bearers of the mark of Islam find that the public visibility that the headscarf has earned them is also serving to deny them public agency. This is most explicitly illustrated in the way that the same party, Refah, that encouraged the proliferation of the image of the veiled woman in the public sphere actively discouraged the presence of women in its ranks. The Refah Party did not have a single woman in any of its administrative ranks as it rose to prominence or when it was banned in 1998.¹⁰ Sibel Eraslan, the former leader of the Women’s Commission of the Refah Party, who had organized an immensely successful election campaign in Istanbul before the local elections in 1994, was denied an administrative post in the city administration after the party’s electoral victory. When she demanded an active position in the administration, she and her associates were removed from their positions at the Women’s Commission, to be replaced by the wives and daughters of top-level party officials.¹¹

The city administration of Istanbul under Erdoğan’s mayoralty (1994–98) diverted a great deal of its resources to the creation of an intellectually sophisticated and rich field of activities around conferences, seminars, and panels, to which a wide variety of speakers were invited from both within Turkey and abroad, including secularists, Islamists, liberals, and Marxists. The only group of people systematically excluded from these events were Islamic women intellectuals. Those few who were invited to participate were allowed to address topics only concerning women and the family, whereas non-Islamist women academics were invited as speakers on themes that were relevant to their specific fields, ranging from politics to law and the arts. When Eraslan, a political activist and lawyer, was invited to panels and seminars, regardless of whether they were organized by Islamists or secularists, she was invariably expected to talk only about issues related to the headscarf or new veiling and the status of women in Islam, not about her political views or about her research in law.¹² As noted by Ayşe Saktanber, “covered women cannot raise their voices and speak through the tenets of women’s opposition, no matter

¹⁰ Refah’s successor, the Fazilet Party, recruited some women to its ranks to save face, yet none of these women wore headscarves.

¹¹ Sibel Eraslan, interviewed by the author, July 15, 1997, Istanbul.

¹² Sibel Eraslan, interviewed by the author, September 13, 1996, Istanbul.

how successful they are as political activists or how well educated they are as intellectuals" (2006, 28).

As a result of increasing demands by Islamic women intellectuals to be represented in the conferences and panels organized by the city administration, a new series of monthly panels for women was launched, titled "Meetings about Us" (*Bize Dair Toplantılar*). This series was organized in cooperation with PÜMER (Proje Üretim Merkezi; Center for the Production of Projects), a research center established by a group of Islamic women intellectuals, journalists, writers, artists, and lawyers. Just as the title "Meetings about Us" designates women as a specific group set apart from the public requiring a panel series of their own, the panel themes have also confined the issues to those specific to women, as indicated in their titles: "Women in Politics," "Popular Culture and Women," "Women and the Public Sphere," "Women and Family," "Women in the Media," and so on. While this panel series opened up an important opportunity for Islamic women intellectuals to participate in debates, it also served to confine them to women's issues and exclude them from all the other panels and conferences that were crucial sites of public debate and discussion.

Tying public visibility of Islam to the headscarf has enhanced the political agency of male Islamist elites in another way, as illustrated by men's reluctance to bear the mark of Islamic identity themselves. Islamist men have strongly resisted the visibility of male Islamic identities in the public sphere. Calling for the negotiation of gender hierarchies operating within Islamist discourse, a group of Islamic women intellectuals attempted to open up a discussion on Islamic male identities: "When we look around us, we see a lot of books, panels and seminars on how women should be in Islam. [During sermons] the imams in mosques tell their male audiences how women should be in Islam. . . . While Muslim female identity is discussed in detail and is always on the agenda, 'Muslim male identity' never really becomes an issue. [We] wonder why. . . . Is it because the term 'Muslim' already means 'Muslim man'? And thus a 'Muslim female identity' has to be specified as a separate category?" (Şişman and Böhürler 1993, 16). Male Islamists dismissed this call for negotiation, repudiating the allusion to male power as a "fake" problem that was not an "internal matter or a vital issue, but an imposition upon us [Islamic circles] from the outside" (Şişman and Böhürler 1993, 27).¹³ Thus, while their images

¹³ These are the words of İsmail Kara, a prominent Islamic intellectual who is the author of *Türkiye'de İslamcılık Düşüncesi* [Islamic thought in Turkey] (1986), the first and most comprehensive work on this topic. His dismissal of the debate on Islamic male identity was in response to questions posed by Şişman and Böhürler, who initiated this debate in a monthly Islamic publication (1993, 27).

are constantly being promoted in public displays toward the construction of new Islamic identities, veiled women cannot find any agency or even recognition as subjects other than as veiled women. For this reason, Eraslan has argued that “women are not present in the public sphere, only their images are.”¹⁴

Just as the secularist state of the founding years constructed itself as a political agent by inscribing a new national consciousness through the bodies of unveiled women in the public sphere, the Islamists of the 1990s (particularly the Refah Party) constructed themselves as the political agents who would introduce a new national identity by forging and manipulating images of Muslim women. And just as the increased public visibility of women in the 1920s and 1930s operated not to grant but in fact to deny political agency to women, so did the proliferation of the images of veiled women in the public sphere operate to deny agency to Islamic women in the 1990s and onward.

The subjugating effect of the public sphere is evident, then, not only in the ways that women are silenced and excluded from public life but also in the particular forms their presence takes and the conditions structuring their inclusion. The public sphere is a field of power relations that subjugates by instituting a regime of visibility that exerts tight control over modes of symbolic representation as well as the terms and conditions of political participation. Both these techniques of control effectively deny agency to particular gendered citizens. Although outright exclusion has come to be recognized as a mode of oppression, controlled inclusion structured by particular regimes of visibility has not yet secured that recognition.

Contrary to the emancipatory ideals attributed to the Habermasian public sphere, public visibility and voice do not necessarily promote political liberties. As a regime of visibility, the public sphere also operates to deny agency by constructing a public gaze that continuously marks and categorizes subjectivities. As the Turkish case makes clear, both the evolution of a secular public sphere under the surveillance of the state and recent Islamist appropriations of the public sphere have depended upon the production and manipulation of proliferating images of women, unveiled and veiled, as a technology of controlled inclusion that enhances the political agency of men while seriously constraining women.

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¹⁴ Sibel Eraslan, interviewed by the author, September 13, 1996, Istanbul.

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